



<http://social-epistemology.com>  
ISSN: 2471-9560

Exploitation and the Politics of Knowledge: A Commentary on Luis Arboledas-Lérida's Marxist Analysis of Science Communication

Justin Cruickshank, University of Birmingham, [j.cruickshank@bham.ac.uk](mailto:j.cruickshank@bham.ac.uk)

---

Cruickshank, Justin. 2022. "Exploitation and the Politics of Knowledge: A Commentary on Luis Arboledas-Lérida's Marxist Analysis of Science Communication." *Social Epistemology Review and Reply Collective* 11 (4): 12-25. <https://wp.me/p1Bfg0-6G5>.

In a recent issue of *Social Epistemology*, Luis Arboledas-Lérida (2021) developed a Marxist analysis of the requirement universities place on science academics to use social media to promote their research findings, with this being conceptualised as an instance of the labour exploitation necessary within all forms of employment under capitalism. In this reply I agree that universities have to be understood as part of the societies they are situated within, but suggest a broader analysis to explain the exploitation occurring in the production and dissemination of knowledge.

In what follows I will outline Arboledas-Lérida's argument, consider a broader range of problems creating exploitation in the pre-neoliberal university and then explore how neoliberalism intensifies these and undermines the conditions for collective agency to transform working practices. I will conclude by suggesting one possible way forward. The suggestion may be an unusual one, for it is inspired by an anarchist emphasis on horizontal and co-operative organisation, but makes reference to the public sphere and civil society. This is not to celebrate liberalism, but it is to note the problems faced by the neoliberal state's hollowing out of the public sphere for collective agency and solidarity, and the potential in civil society for collective agency which can exist beyond the terms of reference set by the liberal state.

### **The Necessity of Exploitation in the Capitalist University**

Arboledas-Lérida draws on Marx's Critique of Political Economy to give a materialist analysis of recent developments concerning science communication. He argues that academic scientists have increasingly had to become 'ambassadors' for their work using digital media. Arboledas-Lérida takes issue with the concept of 'digital labour' which has gained currency, arguing that the many forms of work involving digital technology have nothing distinct about them, from a Marxist materialist perspective, and that consequently academic digital labour needs to focus on the 'social attributes of labour in capitalism and not historical specific instances of this' (2022, 252). Whereas many contemporary writers develop what he regards as an 'idiosyncratic' reading of Marx's Critique of Political Economy, the argument set out in his article on the impact of knowledge-sharing via social media is held to be original because it remains within an accurate reading of Marx. This leads Arboledas-Lérida to argue that:

Science communication responds to a *form-determination* of the capitalistic relationship of production. It is part and parcel with the antagonistic character which the capitalistic relationship lends to social production; it *inheres* in the capital-relation itself (2022, 253; emphasis in original).

In other words, the work undertaken by academic scientists in using digital technology to communicate their research findings directly to the public, rather than rely on intermediaries such as science journalists, is to be understood in the same way as all work is to be understood. This means understanding work in terms of its intrinsically exploitative nature under capitalism and the tension within capitalism that arises from capital needing to extract as much value as possible from labour (most of which is kept as profit), with this in turn

leading to problems with the reproduction of labour: as labour has to be squeezed more intensely to get more from it, labour becomes exhausted and increasingly less able to be as productive as capital needs it to be. Academic labour power becomes ‘worn out’ by the never-ending increase in work, which now includes being trained to be effective—and continually participating—in the digital communication of the results of scientific research. In this context, the division between work and private life become even more eroded than before as academic labourers need to keep demonstrating their productivity / ‘performance’ in the highly surveilled workplace to managers. These managers, we can say, are only concerned with how the brand of the university is performing in terms of the international reputation market, driven by the rankings industry. The worker will be ‘responsibilised’ to ‘deliver’ the ‘outputs’ required, with workshops on ‘resilience’ and ‘mental health coping strategies’, whilst having to work ever longer hours for pay and pensions which may decrease significantly, with health and quality of life being destroyed as a result.

The treatment of academic scientists in terms of having to take on additional work, despite already difficult workloads, is taken to be an example of a general process intrinsic to capitalism, with academic-specific struggles having to be seen as part of a broader class-struggle against capitalist exploitation. As Arboledas-Lérida puts it:

Capital will always look for ways to subject academic workers (whose fate is shared with the entire working class) to exploitation beyond the normal rate—a similar fight will thus have to be waged time and again, irrespective of whether it concerns science communication or any other aspect of the scientific production process. Subsequently, this relatively narrow fight for a linear increase in wages must be carried on within the overarching *class struggle* against the undermining of the working conditions for the collective science labourer (2022, 261; emphasis in original).

I agree that work under capitalism is intrinsically exploitative and in what follows I want to explore an intersectional understanding of exploitation, which also focuses on the stratification within academic jobs between those with control over the knowledge production and dissemination process, and those with little or no control over the process.

### **The Feudal System of Exploitation**

In an earlier article for the *SERRC* on higher education (Cruickshank 2019), I argued that while the rise of neoliberal political economy has been detrimental for universities, we should be wary of implicitly romanticising the non-neoliberal past. I referred to universities as having working relations that were ‘Feudal’ in the sense that there were powerful hierarchies within the academic staff (as much or more than between managers and academics then, under a more ‘collegial’ form of governance). These hierarchies were harmful because: they reproduced existing inequalities concerning class, gender and ethnicity; enabled the Feudal Lord to exploit ‘their’ underlings by, for example, taking the credit for research work undertaken by an underling with the dissemination of this via conferences and articles, making the Feudal Lord seem like the one who had contributed the most; like all hierarchical relationships requiring deference it was based on demanding an irrational—unquestioning—approach to authority that entailed repression, resentment and the reification of others; and because such Feudal relations created a patronage system where the

Feudal Lords shaped knowledge production by shaping who got jobs and promotions, the problems to research and the terms of reference for the research to be undertaken. These harmful Feudal conditions within universities undermine the development of solidarity, not only because of intensely jealous and resentful Feudal Lords competing for departmental and university-wide privilege, but because of the intensely jealous and resentful competition that arises in their departmental underlings seeking access to better research resources, employment security, tenure or promotion.

While philosophers tended to construct idealised conceptions of the scientific community, those undertaking empirical work in how the production of knowledge occurred, including feminist researchers, made clear a gap between the ideal and the actuality. To some extent this is expected and the ideal may be treated as a Weberian ideal-type in the sense that it was a one sided simplification designed to pick out an important defining feature which actual behaviour tended to greater or lesser degrees to approximate to. However, a reluctance on the part of philosophers to consider social factors shaping knowledge production and dissemination resulted in the obfuscation and reproduction of unquestioned norms and conduct that reproduced hierarchies based on gender, ethnicity and class and which set the frame for research in an overly narrow way by excluding people or giving them a subordinate status in a dialogue. Research teams are shaped by social factors shaping who gets employed, who sets the terms of reference, who gets listened to and who goes on to become a Feudal Lord themselves to set up their own patronage system.

Knowledge dissemination in the form of teaching also plays a significant role in what questions are asked and who is able to address those questions, that is, it plays a significant role in how people are socialised into a discipline, what messages they get sent about whose 'face fits' and who is important, and in reproducing prejudices. This is now challenged by the decolonise the curriculum movement in the social sciences and humanities and feminists more broadly across all disciplines. Feminist scholars criticise epistemic injustice in knowledge dissemination in terms of whose work gets placed on a curriculum and who gets cited in research, with women who have produced important research being ignored or marginalised (on this, see for instance, Bacevic 2021).

So, while academics *qua* academics may be exploited as workers, given the way pay does not reflect the value for the employer created under capitalism, which is an intrinsically exploitative system, it is important to remember other forms of inequality, oppression and exploitation. In Marxist terms, the Feudal Lords would be in an ambiguous position because while they were ultimately workers, they also had significant control over resources and benefitted from the labour of others in a fashion analogous to the capitalist retaining most of the value the workers made. In a world of intersectional exploitation, the Feudal Lords would decide who got to be a producer of academic capital and how much of the value of the capital they, the Lord, would take for themselves. The Feudal Lord, while not owning the means of production in the sense of owning the university or laboratory, would own some aspects of the knowledge production and dissemination process, together with owning the futures of the underlings, making them able to profit from the hierarchy, with higher pay.

## Neoliberalism, Legibility and the Public Sphere

The rise of neoliberalism has had a significant impact on higher education which, as many critics argue, has been detrimental in terms of working conditions and the dissemination of knowledge. Neoliberalism is hostile to professional autonomy and to the broader notions of the public sphere, public service and civil society. Rather than replace Feudal relations though, the Feudal system has adapted to neoliberal conditions. Top-down marketisation 'reforms' and subsequent increased managerialism has seen Feudalism intensify rather than be replaced by 'transparent' / legible 'performance indicators' in a 'meritocratic' market of ideas where individuals are assessed solely on their work and only a class of professional managers has power, not academics, however senior. Before discussing some of the impacts of neoliberalism on higher education, I will briefly outline how I define neoliberalism.

As the anarchist anthropologist James Scott (1998) argued, the modern state is defined by its drive for legibility, to extend bureaucratic control over all domains, with this applying to all modern states, from the Leninist Soviet Union to liberal states. Neoliberalism, despite the anti-statist, anti-bureaucracy and anti-interventionist rhetoric, is an elitist state project and so it is not surprising that it also seeks control via legibility, which is the hallmark of all modern states.

Early liberalism sought to protect the economic interests of the 'individual', meaning the white bourgeois colonial man and neoliberalism seeks to protect the economic interests of the 'individual', now meaning corporate capital. Neoliberal states construct and regulate markets to benefit corporations and finance capital, undermining not just organised labour but the professions, the public sector and civil society. The neoliberal state does not want any organised group to have an ability to resist its top-down imposition of market forces or audit-proxies for the price signal with marketized (and defunded) public services and nor does it want people to support or even recognise any notion of a public service promoting a public good as this clashes with the *homo economicus* form of consciousness it promotes (Brown 2015; Davies 2014; Harvey 2005; Holmwood 2011; Van Horn and Mirowski 2009).

The public sphere and civil society are hollowed out and securitised, meaning that: organisations such as professional bodies are weakened as professions are weakened through the defunding and increased bureaucracy imposed on public sector professionals, designed to remove autonomy and force them to adapt to state-imposed proxies for the price-signal; any notion of public service for the public good is replaced by a more marketized conception of services; citizens are encouraged to think of themselves as consumers, not members of a collective or public wanting good public services for fellow citizens; public services decline due to defunding in order to nudge people towards private provision and resentment towards public sector professionals unable to deliver a high quality service which is misperceived as professional failure not state created failure; protest is discouraged and undermined; and there is the construction, with the help of the media, of racialised moral panics and other attacks on 'enemies within', designed to make the population fearful and resentful towards less powerful groups and protestors, and more acquiescent to state authority, with 'states of exception' (Agamben 2005) helping normalise increased authoritarian politics (see: Brown, 2015; and Holmwood, 2011 on the hollowing out of the public sphere).

In the UK: the NHS is subject to multiple market ‘reforms’ and a large legibility system of performance metrics in a defunded environment; and universities (which are quasi-public sector, being private charitable institutions that receive public funding) are subject to a seemingly endless flow of government announcements, policies, legal changes, and ‘frameworks’ to measure and monitor professional activity, in a system of neoliberal legibility. The ‘non-interventionist’ neoliberal state has sought to use audit culture in lieu of the price signal in an attempt to nudge student-customers towards STEM degrees.

The Teaching Excellent and Student Outcomes Framework (or TEF) was meant to measure teaching ‘quality’ in terms of career outcomes, to nudge students to STEM and universities to increased STEM provision as higher-ranking courses could increase the student fee in line with inflation. Eventually though the subject-specific TEF was dropped and the earlier institutional-level TEF, which was controversial, produced data that is now out of date. The TEF was constructed to try to use an audit regime to re-engineer the student market in higher education and to increase market competition for STEM courses (while seeing defunding and decline in the humanities and social sciences, other than economics, accounting, business and law), the government also removed the cap on the number of students universities can recruit (the ‘student number controls’). This occurred after the tripling of the student fee for all courses and resulted in universities recruiting to cheaper-to-teach non-STEM courses to help cross-subsidise STEM courses. The unpaid student loans became part of the national debt and added significantly to this. The non-interventionist interventionist state undermined its own policies though an unintended consequence.

Neoliberals such as Hayek would lament this attempt to construct markets using audit regimes of legibility and would prefer a reliance on market forces and the price signal, but the state’s attempt to take the cap off student fees, to create a free market in fees, failed because the Liberal Democrats entered a coalition with the Conservatives and argued for a £9000 cap, having campaigned to abolish fees which were a third of that. The attempt to create such a free market had though been initiated by the Labour Government. It was this failure to impose a free market that then led to the creation of the TEF which was a massive waste of public money. Interestingly, the whole point of the TEF was destroyed before it left the Houses of Parliament, as the House of Lords severed the connection between teaching grades and fee levels, but the Government pressed on with it, in the hope that better rankings for STEM would be sufficient to nudge increased demand for STEM.

Recently the Conservative Government have talked of cutting the fee for all courses while only offering a top-up teaching grant for STEM in the hope of seeing the social sciences and humanities decline, although after years of speculation this was eventually abandoned in February 2022. Cutting universities’ incomes further when the fee is already frozen has seen university incomes decline and could result in the failure of a large public university, which would have catastrophic regional effects on employment and damaging effects on the Conservatives seeking now to ‘level up’ the regions.

Market reforms in England also saw the liberalisation of the market with it being easier for private for-profit providers to enter the education market and award their own degrees. However, for-profit providers only play a very small role in UK higher education, despite the

government talking of their importance in providing skills training to disadvantaged communities. Such providers would also be unlikely to provide STEM courses given the sheer cost of these and would rely instead on teaching the professions such as law and accounting.

For the state, the ideal would be a higher education system focused mostly on STEM and vocational training with academic jobs depending on their ability to produce trained graduates who were of use to the national economy and who received high salaries. Any notion of higher education creating a critically minded and publicly engaged citizenry studying subjects not directly connected to vocational training by professionals who had autonomy is seen as a threat by the neoliberal state. The state holds that the market will serve students by undermining professional laziness and poor teaching, with competition seeing the best courses (based on training not critical thinking) beat the worst (meaning humanities and social science), but the state actually seeks to get students serving the market, by paying for their own training.

Accompanying the use of legibility as part of the politics of hollowing out, the state, in the UK, has sought increased control through securitisation, via: the expansion of the Prevent counter-extremism strategy which mandates all public sector workers, including university teaching staff and NHS doctors and nurses, to surveil those they interact with on a professional basis for any sign of 'extremism', which stemmed from and intensified Islamophobia; the outlawing protest which is disruptive, will come into effect when the Policing, Crime, Courts and Sentencing Bill passes the final stages through the Houses of Parliament and gets 'Royal Assent'; and a number of culture wars. These state constructed culture wars, supported by the press, concern: a threat to free speech in universities; 'biased' approaches to teaching in schools and heritage organisations such as the National Trust (meaning approaches that discuss colonial history); and universities 'failing' the nation and student-customers by producing 'useless' / 'mickey mouse' degrees in 'left wing' subjects that result in graduates having a low salary and being of no use to the national economy.

Neoliberals promote deregulation as this is meant to remove bureaucratic redtape and lower taxes, to liberate people to become entrepreneurs and to ensure the market serves customers by being agile enough to provide exactly what products or services people demand at the price they demand. The reality is that wealth is polarising, public services are declining, and the state is trying to make people better serve the market by buying the training they need to 'attract' a job, with education reduced to a human capital investment. In this context, the state constructs enemies within, to seek support for state power and to scapegoat groups to reproduce prejudices and resentments. The state helps redistribute wealth upwards, encourages hostility to those constructed as enemies within, and engages in a system of legibility requiring bureaucratic redtape, albeit in the service of 'market reforms' rather than old style reformist socialism, with these reforms helping the political and capitalist elites.

While the bourgeois civil society was seen by a number of liberal thinkers as playing a key role in a stable and functional liberal society, it is undermined by the neoliberal drive to reduce as many relations as possible to market relations. This is important because while civil society was never intended to be the catalyst for radical change with, for instance, Hegel and Durkheim, in different ways, seeing it as part of an organic unity, the post-war corporatist years seeing the state controlling groups through bureaucratic integration, and the post-

Soviet years seeing the west prescribe the need for former state-communist countries to develop a civil society to create a liberal culture, it nonetheless has the potential for collective and co-operative action which could be extended. The anarchist writer on social policy, Colin Ward (1973), criticised the statist-bureaucratic provision of services, because that allowed the state and capital to control groups. Instead, he argued for co-operative provision of services, with this co-operative agency building an alternative society within liberal capitalism by using a different form of consciousness to extend people's natural sociability by creating non-marketised and non-statist / bureaucratic service provision. While Ward would, unlike Hegel and Durkheim, reject the notion of the bourgeois civil society forming part of an organic whole, we can say that the concept of a space for organisation in between the family and the market and the state opened up a space for imagining alternative forms of service provision and collective agency.

Similarly, we may mention the importance of co-operative universities which do not charge a fee, which rely on voluntary labour, and which exist to create a community of learning, based on horizontal organisation as much as possible. Given this potential space for collective agency that civil society opens up, it is not surprising that Scott argued that an active civil society was able to resist state impositions of legibility as well as, in non-liberal societies, legibility being undermined by tradition which was opaque to the state. Neoliberalism presents a threat to this by its attempt to construct, as Brown (2015), drawing on Foucault and Marx argued, a ubiquitous market rationality, where the social world is seen only in economic terms, with competition not co-operation being the 'common-sense' that defines all interactions from work to education and dating. Alongside bureaucratic legibility there is an attempt to refashion consciousness to evacuate any conception of a social or public good addressed by collective co-operative agency. Collective organisations using the space opened up in civil society, such as co-operative universities, can resist this.

### **The Feudal University in Neoliberal Times**

The rise of neoliberalism has meant declining resources from the state and intensified competition. As a consequence of this: casualisation has increased to increase profits or surplus; pressure on staff to ensure the university brand competes well in the rankings game has intensified, with this entailing vast systems of institution-specific legibility constantly to monitor staff performance and student-customer 'satisfaction' to pre-empt the results of state-imposed legibility systems; and the system of Feudal Lords and patronage have remained in place because the university wants to piggy back the success of its brand in the rankings game on their success in gaining grants, producing large numbers of publications, doing work more likely recognised by the state, employers or other organisations as useful, attracting graduate students, and engaging in promotional work to increase the brand of the academic and the university.

As Täuber and Mahmoudi (2022) argue, bullying can be a career tool in competition for departmental power, with what I term Feudal Lords, selecting those they want to continue their work and undermining or removing very capable people who would, *ceteris paribus*, rise up the ranks and become seen as a threat, through various forms of bullying, including mobbing. In an insecure, precarious and highly surveilled workplace, the Feudal Lords can

draw on audit culture performance metrics to seek technocratic legitimisation for labelling someone as incapable. While the performance metrics have an aura of objectivity, the collection and interpretation of data, together with the working conditions people are given, can all work to undermine or destroy the careers of promising scientists who the Feudal Lord regards as a threat. In this process, historical inequalities, especially those of gender, come into play.

With the rise of neoliberalism, academics are expected to become 'brands' and social media plays an important role in this. Just as students are encouraged to become their own brands on social media sites like LinkedIn to 'attract' 'investors' (employers), so academics are encouraged to become a brand so that their research has more reach and they can compete more effectively against competitor academics for promotions (given the citations) or jobs (given their web reputation). Even without the pressure from an employer on academics to become web-ambassadors of their work, academics would feel pressure to engage in such activities, because others may 'steal a march' on them in the neoliberal-Feudal highly competitive environment for resources, status, power and continued employment security (see Bacevic, 2019 on the pressure to be a neoliberal academic). Given this, one may accept that authors such as Brown (2015) are correct to talk not just of formal demands, but of the informal culture that influences people by telling them constantly about the need to be an individual brand seeking self-interest in a zero-sum competition with others. Similarly, Rosalind Gill in her famous chapter 'Breaking the Silence: The Hidden Injuries of Neo-Liberal Academia' (2009), drew on Foucault to discuss how academics had to internalise the neoliberal norms promoted in audit culture and discipline themselves to work constantly to meet never ending targets while under constant surveillance. On paper, one may have set terms of work, but in practice, the neoliberal culture and the system of legibility used to 'see' academic performance used by managers trying to ensure good results with rankings and any state metrics, resulted in any meaningful notion of a home—work split being impossible. Academics became 'responsibilised' to engage in overwork and, with the rise of social media, this includes the task self-promotion to the world via social media and not just the university where one is employed. To be clear, I am not a Foucaultian, but the notion of an informal culture having a damaging impact on people as well as formal work requirements being harmful, is an important one.

The ongoing industrial action in the UK over the 20% drop in the value of academics' pay over the last 10 years, the massive cut to pensions (in the USS scheme) accrued after April 2022, unmanageable workloads, mass casualisation and the gender pay gap, has seen ongoing strikes and calls for 'action short of a strike' (or 'working to rule'). The latter means stopping unpaid work which academia relies on such as low paid external examining, working in the evening and weekends to try and meet research targets for internal proxies for the REF, or marking, etc. Universities have responded by threatening to cut academics' salaries by 50% or 100% for not fulfilling their work obligations. This highlights the hyper-exploitation of academics, especially in the UK where managers are threatening to remove people's pay if they only do the work they are paid for. Academia relies on unpaid labour which massively intensifies the exploitative nature of knowledge production and dissemination and academics have gone along with this out of a culture of overwork where any time with the family is seen as a loss of unpaid productive work-time which one needs to engage in to show the value of one's personal brand to managers.

With the rise of neoliberal legibility, one has to work well beyond ‘the contract’ to meet the demands of the system of legibility and self-promotion via social media becomes not only an expectation but a way for an academic to seek a spurious sense of safety and satisfaction. One may, especially with sufficient online attention, come to invest emotionally in one’s own brand. Given that social media is designed to be addictive, the recognition gained may well result in a desire to spend as much time as possible doing self-promotion, to gain recognition and feel more secure. Social media appears to be an escape for academics, whatever their job requirements and discipline, because creating a social media persona can feel like escaping into a private bubble where one’s constructed identity received continual validation from positive feedback. Just as stress is privatised, with academics feeling isolated and incapable, so too is escape from stress privatised, with academics constructing an online bubble and relying on constant positive attention. There is the problem though that as others continually promote themselves too, the sense of imposter syndrome which occurs in academics could well intensify, as everyone engages in shouting the loudest. Further, the need for constant online validation can itself become a source of stress and depression.

Those academics in the social sciences and humanities using social media may also post on social and political topics as well as on their specific research. This can create problems with echo chambers just reinforcing opinions, trolling and doxxing by far right social media posters, as well as the risk of a pile-on from those on the left if someone says something that goes against a consensus. Mark Fisher, in a controversial essay called ‘Exiting the Vampire Castle’ (2013), criticised left wing commentators (which included, but which was broader than, academics) who ignored class to focus only on identity-politics and who would start or join ‘Twitterstorms’ against an individual, previously seen as progressive, for saying something taken to be objectionable. Fisher was not against criticism, holding people to account and discussion, but against the ‘openly savage’ nature of these storms and the frightening prospect that one may fall foul of a group and receive thousands of abusive messages. Indeed, given that a few messages get a critical point across, having people pile on afterwards can only be to either deliberately increase psychological damage of the target or to get positive feedback for one’s own online persona in a constant need to get such feedback, with any psychological damage to the target being not considered or considered justified as a secondary effect. Academics entering social media to establish a bubble of self-identity and expression may find this is potentially risky or at least a source of stress given the need constantly to garner positive feedback and avoid abuse.

However, in a recent article on a scandal at Harvard University, Jacobs (2022) argues that social media helped undermine an abusive and corrupt form of quite extreme pan-disciplinary Feudalism. As Jacobs puts it:

We are witnessing older academic hierarchies, which are almost unabashedly feudal and based on ideas of apprenticeship, come aground onto the escalating austerity in the neoliberal university. As a young academic—emboldened by the actions of the three brave Harvard graduate students who filed the lawsuit (Margaret Czerwienski, Lilia Kilburn, and Amulya Mandava)—told me this week: the liberal managerialism that attempted to contain the abuses of feudal academia is increasingly delegitimized among

younger generations of academics, who turn to social media and labor organizing to try to shift the balance of power.

While I would argue that neoliberalism at least supports Feudalism, with defunding increasing precarity and thus the need to secure jobs via having a face that 'fitted in', it is the case that the rise of social media can be used for matters of social and employment justice. In discussing this case concerning a major figure in anthropology, Jacobs argues that a very strong international system of patronage led not only to that figure's influence shaping what was researched (and taught), but to who had careers and who did not, with this power leading to support from powerful academic figures across the globe, who signed letters in support of the accused, until social media protest and the filing of legal suits against Harvard made them retract. In this case then, social media, as with the #metoo movement, can be a catalyst for important change and a possible undermining of existing power relations.

A final point I will make here before summing up on the broad nature of academic exploitation and then considering other possible sources of resistance and change, is that a mix of systems of legibility and an informal culture combine to, over time, see a shift in attitudes, appointments, research undertaken and the mode of communication. What this means is that while the state may pay lip service to academic freedom and while it seeks, in the UK, to legislate to protect its conception of 'free speech' in universities, there is a general change in social science away from scholarship that is more critical and which has connections to the humanities and theory (meaning social theory and continental philosophy) and towards research that is more 'scientific'. To be clear, this is not a critical point against quantitative research, which is a useful research method. It is a critical point against a general shift in universities to work that is more applied and technocratic. Quantitative work does not have to be technocratic, as it can raise important issues about widespread and sustained inequality, but the move to a more 'scientific' social science is a move to a technocratic and uncritical approach to developing a science of, not society, but those aspects of society the state wants researched.

Partly this is due, in the UK, to: the pressure to get grants and what grants are available being influenced to some extent by government objectives (despite the stated belief in academic freedom); the Research Excellence Framework audit which measures 'significance' (meaning citations and the establishment of a name as a citable-brand), alongside 'originality' and 'rigour', as well as research 'impact', meaning the take-up of research by outside organisations; and to the pressure to produce research of economic value ('knowledge exchange' measure by the KEF or 'Knowledge Exchange Framework') of use in increasing graduate employability.

But, I would say, as much as this, there is a general shift in attitudes, towards work which is regarded as more 'scientific', because there is a cultural shift underway that sees knowledge as having value only if of use and while blue skies STEM research may not be of immediate use the turn to science to create a technocratic social science means being seen to do 'useful' work more easily recognised and valued as such. In a recent article on US social science publishing throughout the 2010s, which is not subject to the same government legibility-audit influence, but which is subject to a cultural shift, Savage and Olejniczak (2022) argue that the number of books published has declined significantly across different disciplines, while article publishing increased, with this being connected not to a desire to publish

shorter items more quickly, but to the use of the methods developed in natural science. One consequence of this was that theory, in its usual sense, was being squeezed out.

When Durkheim sought to establish a quantitative—scientific sociology as a professional social science worthy of its own departments, chairs, funding, and degrees etc. in France, he did so as someone well versed in philosophy, familiar with, for instance, Nietzsche and pragmatism. Now there is the risk that future social scientists may only be trained to answer a narrow range of questions using the same methodological techniques with no sense of the history of their discipline and the broader connections to other disciplines and the types of questions they address. One may only know the latest empirical papers on a currently researched topic and lack the social-historical intellectual resources to think more widely about how research topics are framed and addressed. Ultimately, the social sciences may become sites for the creation of knowledge that elites accept as useful, with secure positions within knowledge production and dissemination relying on systems of patronage that work to serve the market.

A broader approach to the politics of knowledge production and dissemination, than that of Marxism, would take an intersectional view. While we may accept that academic workers, as noted above, are exploited, some workers have considerable power over others, with this stemming in part from historical inequalities concerning class, race and gender.

Neoliberalism has not removed Feudal aspects of university employment and neoliberalism has created both a system of legibility and a working culture that intensify exploitation, by producing overwork, exhaustion, stress, depression, intensified competition for resources and success in the rankings market intensifying Feudal power and the need for graduate students to seek acceptance from a Feudal Lord to enter their patronage system. Universities are seeking, or at least talking of seeking, what Nancy Fraser (2019) called ‘progressive neoliberalism’, meaning they want to promote the liberal principle of equality of opportunity in market competition for jobs and promotions. The problems here are that: jobs and promotion are tied into systems of patronage which themselves can still be influenced by historical inequalities; this promotes an individualist-competitive outlook rather than one based on solidarity and collective action; and that the problem is with the neoliberal and, indeed, capitalist approach to universities, which commodifies knowledge and pushes workers endlessly to increase productivity, which makes employment itself oppressive and exploitative. These problems relate to how workers produce and disseminate knowledge but there is also a problem, under Feudalism and with neoliberalism, concerning what knowledge gets produced and disseminated. As I have suggested, systems of patronage shaped knowledge production and now these are, in neoliberal times, moving towards the production of uncritical and technocratic knowledge in the social sciences.

Workers become squeezed to work longer hours by employers, but there is a culture that promotes overwork and self-promotion which can also see social media used as a privatised escape from a privatised stress, although the actual causes of problems are historic and structural. A more social and collective response is needed to seek an alternative response to the current politics of knowledge production and dissemination.

## Final Considerations

In the UK there are problems with the significantly falling value of pay, unmanageable workloads, major pension cuts, mass casualisation, and the gender pay gap, with strikes occurring again in response to these ongoing problems. Earlier strike action led to a sense of solidarity with people commenting how they had overcome their sense of isolation and realised the problems they faced were faced by others. Hopefully, this will continue and lead to sustained union resistance to ongoing assaults on working conditions of staff, although mobilising to meet the threshold for a strike to be legal has been more challenging this time. But this is only part of the problem, for many academics seeking escape from casual contracts, one hope is to gain work with a Feudal Lord who can help make their career, but this can limit the range of critical voices in academia, because in addition potentially to reproducing historical inequalities, it polices the scope for critical dialogue. I would say that a change to universities that can address the full extent of the problems is only possible as part of a much wider social and political change. This is not to deny the importance of struggles to reduce the exploitation currently experienced, but it is to say much more needs to be done too. Such social and political change, I would suggest, is possible from groups in civil society that organise in a co-operative way and which seek to tackle problems in a way that recognises the interlinking of social and economic problems. Co — operative provision of services, operating as much as possible beyond state legibility regimes, could help push for a transformation.

One may hold there is a tension between advocating an anarchist approach, which calls for horizontal organisation, and a criticism of the undermining of professions, as professions may be seen as elitist, especially with the way Feudal universities operate. However, anarchism does not commit to a folk epistemology and can be used to argue for an approach to authority, in this case, epistemic authority, that is rational and free from domination, because it is based on a dialogic engagement with lay agents, which helps empower them, to, in this case, become more informed in their criticism. Similarly, one would not eschew medical authority, despite criticising the abuses of medical authority, but argue for medical professionals to have a more dialogic relationship with their patients (Gadamer, 1993).

Marx (2000) famously held that social being determines consciousness in *A Contribution to the Critique of Political Economy*, meaning that the material relations of production people enter into shape their consciousness. For Marx, the collective experience of the intrinsically exploitative and chaotic conditions of capitalist production would lead to a revolutionary consciousness developing. The problem with today's experience of work in the global north is that in economies which are mostly post-industrial and service sector based is that people's experience is more individualised, especially with the increase in casualisation and the transfer of jobs into self-employment. Of course there are cases of workers in, for example, Amazon warehouses and some fast food 'restaurants' in the US, developing a collective action to shared conditions of exploitation, and pushing for union recognition along with improved pay and conditions, in the face of constantly squeezing with low pay and long hours of hard labour. Nonetheless, there is a general rise of a fragmented experience of employment and this is particularly true in academia where fellow academics who are not formally part of management can act as exploiters to serve themselves and by extension managers who want the brand to succeed in the rankings game.

I would like to close by suggesting that a shared sense of exploitation is the necessary but insufficient condition for radical transformative change. Staying with an emphasis on being, or ontology, I will suggest that a sense of finitude is needed, whereby the socio-historical limits to our being are recognised, with this entailing a sense of being invited to go beyond those current limits, not in the sense of transhumanist narcissism, but in terms of dialogue with others and the study of ideas. Collini (2012) held that higher education needed to be dissatisfying rather than satisfying. This was because higher education ought not to be akin to a market transaction where a customer purchases a product, given that students do not know what the subject is and ought not to be making monologic market demands for satisfaction, when the task was that of immersion into new ways of thinking and feeling, which will be a challenging and unsettling process. This can in turn promote the breaking out of imposed cultures of domination and the creation of a consciousness that refuses any monological demand to conform. The problem though is that often universities are defined by Feudal-neoliberal relations of domination, a fractured and exploited workforce finding identity and escape in Twitterstorms driven by a censorious and fractured left attacking itself, notwithstanding the progressive use of social media, and students who are told university is about academics being no more than word butlers delivering small chunks of easily digestible word burgers in a posh but McDonalized (Ritzer 2021) outlet. Collective resistance from academics and students does occur despite this but can then be met with punitive measures from management and Feudal Lords who want their research team's work to be uninterrupted by strikes or occupations.

## References

- Agamben, Giorgio. 2005. *States of Exception*. London: University of Chicago Press.
- Arboledas-Lérida, Luis. 2022. "‘Give the Money Where it’s Due’: The Impact of Knowledge-Sharing via Social Media on the Reproduction of the Academic Labourer." *Social Epistemology* 36 (2): 251-266.
- Bacevic, Jana. 2021. "Epistemic Injustice and Epistemic Positioning: Towards an Intersectional Political Economy." *Current Sociology* online first. November 25. <https://journals.sagepub.com/doi/full/10.1177/00113921211057609>.
- Bacevic, Jana. 2019. "Knowing Neoliberalism." *Social Epistemology* 33 (3-4): 380—392.
- Brown, Wendy. 2015. *Undoing the Demos: Neoliberalism’s Stealth Revolution*. New York: Zone Books.
- Collini, Stefan. 2012. *What are Universities For?* London: Penguin.
- Cruikshank, Justin. 2019. "The Feudal University in the Age of Gaming the System," *Social Epistemology Review and Reply Collective* 8 (8): 12-14.
- Davies, William. 2014. *The Limits of Neoliberalism: Authority, Sovereignty and the Logic of Competition*. London: Sage.
- Fisher, Mark. 2013. "Exiting the Vampire Castle," *The North Star*. November 22. <https://thenorthstar.info/?p=11299>.
- Fraser, Nancy. 2019. *The Old is Dying and the New Cannot be Born*. London: Verso.
- Gadamer, Hans-Georg. 1993. *The Enigma of Health*. Cambridge: Polity.
- Gill, Rosalind. 2009. "Breaking the Silence: The Hidden Injuries of Neo-Liberal Academia." In *Secrecy and Silence in the Research Process: Feminist Reflections* edited by Róisín Ryan-Flood and Rosalind Gill, 228-244. London: Routledge.

- Harvey, David. 2005. *A Brief History of Neoliberalism*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Holmwood, John. 2011. "The Idea of a Public University." In *A Manifesto for the Public University* edited by John Holmwood, 12-26. London: Bloomsbury.
- Jacobs, Sean. 2022. "Letters of Recommendation." *Africa Country*. February 16.  
[https://africasacountry.com/2022/02/letters-of-recommendation?fbclid=IwAR156DLzQHvQ1q\\_gn4h02hdnxOYnUB6Yg5TYh6r-m-tiXysr2Pn0UIPY8vrQ](https://africasacountry.com/2022/02/letters-of-recommendation?fbclid=IwAR156DLzQHvQ1q_gn4h02hdnxOYnUB6Yg5TYh6r-m-tiXysr2Pn0UIPY8vrQ).
- Marx, Karl. 2000 [1977]. *Selected Writings*. Edited by David McLennan. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Ritzer, George. 2021. *The McDonaldization of Society: Into the Digital Age*. London: Sage.
- Savage, William E. and Antony J. Olejniczak. 2022. "More Journal Articles and Fewer Books: Publication Practices in the Social Sciences in the 2010s." *Plos One*. February 3. <https://journals.plos.org/plosone/article/comments?id=10.1371/journal.pone.0263410>.
- Scott, James C. 1998. *Seeing Like a State: How Certain Schemes to Improve the Human Condition have Failed*. London, Yale University Press.
- Täuber, Susanne and Morteza Mahmoudi. 2022. "How Bullying Becomes a Career Tool," *Nature Human Behaviour* (correspondence). February 7.  
<https://twitter.com/DrNancyOlivieri/status/1497227194191556613/photo/1>.
- Van Horn, Robert and Philip Mirowski. 2009. "Reinventing Monopoly and the Role of Corporations: The Roots of Chicago Law and Economics." In *The Road from Mont Pelerin: The Making of the Neoliberal Thought Collective* edited by Philip Mirowski and Dieter Plehwe, 204-237. London: Harvard.
- Ward, Colin. 1973. *Anarchy in Action*. London: Freedom Press.